

Derek Au

Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China



Just the Facts

Clay

a variety of porcelain bodies, both factory-bought and self-mixed using various local porcelain stones and kaolin

Primary forming method

handbuilding with slip-cast slabs

Primary firing temperature

gas in reduction to cone 11–12

Favorite surface treatment

construction marks, such as joins and compass patterns, accentuated by a celadon glaze

Favorite tools

in addition to repurposed and handmade tools, there are two tools from the US that I wouldn't want to do without: stainless steel #11 X-Acto blades and a Mudtools red rib #5

Studio

During my first year in China, I worked at the Jingdezhen Pottery Workshop (PW), which was a wonderful place to learn from local Chinese masters and a lot of great international artists, including Takeshi Yasuda (who was the director of the Workshop at that time). In order to be able to spend more time on my own work, I found a small roof-top studio in the Sculpture Factory, which is part of the same campus where the PW is located. It had a tin roof and no windowpanes, which meant that it was terribly hot in the summer and freezing during winter. Later, I moved into an abandoned basement in a different and beautiful Sculpture Factory building. At the time, the studio was perfect for my needs, but as I devoted more time to my work, I quickly outgrew it. I needed to find a space where I could build my own kiln.

My current studio is located in a residential area close to the ceramic factories. The building was formerly used as a machine shop but had been unused for six years when my friend (a traditional on-glaze painter) and I finally persuaded the landlord we would take care of the place. The building has three floors and a large yard for a total of over 5000 sq. feet of space. Luckily, the building already had three-phase electricity installed. There are three electric kilns: a small high-temperature test kiln, a medium-sized, low-fire kiln for bisque and overglaze, and a larger high-temperature kiln for glaze firings. There is also a fiber downdraft gas kiln that has about 11.6 cubic feet of firing space and is fired with propane. There is a simple glaze booth, glaze room (stocked with traditional materials I've found around Jingdezhen), and a ball mill. My workspace is located in two rooms on the top floor. My technique is largely self-taught and I've had to do a lot of improvising, so most of my tools are either repurposed or handmade.

Jingdezhen is one of the few places in the world where I could afford to have such a setup. My half of the rent is less than \$200 per month. The gas kiln cost about US \$2000. Each



firing uses about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a tank of propane, costing about US \$50. The electric kiln we use for bisque firings was only about \$250, the same for the spray booth. Although the price of living has risen dramatically during my time here, it's still amazingly affordable to start your own studio in Jingdezhen.

In addition to firing work in my own kilns, I also take advantage of Jingdezhen's public kilns. These kilns are open to everyone and fire every day. They fire very quickly but reliably to 2372–2408°F (1300–1320°C). Often when I'm working on a new glaze or porcelain body, I'll put tests in the public kiln and get results out the next day. It's a bit like processing photographic film in a lab.

The best part about my studio is that it is in Jingdezhen. There's history literally everywhere you look, from the locals currently making ceramics using ancient techniques, to the graves of potters in the surrounding mountains, to the layers of ceramic shards under your feet. I live within minutes of ancient kilns sites, folk potteries, dozens of mines for porcelain stone and other traditional materials, and of course Gaoling mountain, the original source for kaolin. At times I have felt that the old traditions and secrets of Chinese porcelain had died off long ago, only to find I wasn't looking hard enough.

Being in Jingdezhen is also one of the least favorite aspects of my studio. At times my friends and I joke that Jingdezhen is our prison. It would be funny if it weren't so true! The food isn't very

good (although I love Chinese food, Jiangxi province is not especially known for its cuisine), the weather is horrible (including an annual flood that affects many studios), and there's not much in the way of culture outside of ceramics. And after investing so much in my studio, at this point I cannot afford to leave.

Paying Dues (and Bills)

I took my first throwing class in college, then dropped out a year later to move to Northern California and become a potter. When the money ran out, I almost ended up becoming a forklift operator instead. I went back to school and studied a hodge-podge of subjects, all the while spending a lot of time in the school's public pottery studio. Years went by with the same pattern—I'd get a job, decide the job was meaningless, quit, and make ceramics for a few months in whatever city I happened to be in. Later, I worked on a boat, which was wonderful because for every three months at sea, I was paid three months of leave-time that I would spend travelling and making ceramics. It was only after I arrived in China, studied Mandarin, and turned 30 that I had the courage to come to Jingdezhen and try once again to be a full-time potter.

I've never really had a nine-to-five, five-days-a-week job. I work every day of the week, spending at least 6 to 8 hours each day in the studio. I work for a few months and then take a long vacation that



ends only when I feel the strong urge to get back in the studio again.

At times when the money has been running low, I've taken on website design work that I do in the evenings at home.

Body

I find that working in a studio is a lot like working on a boat—lots of physical demands but in the end the lifestyle is pretty unhealthy. And people here are remarkably unconcerned about toxins, dust, and exposure, an attitude which unfortunately has rubbed off on me a little. But if the weather is nice, I bike or walk to the studio. And sometimes my friends and I take excursions to the countryside in search of kilns or shards. Perhaps the best way I take care of myself is through diet. I've become very fond of Guangdong cuisine, which is a very balanced diet of meat and fresh vegetables using only small amounts of oil, salt, or sugar. Cooking and eating with friends is also a great way to restore the spirit.

When I worked for a Dutch NGO, more than 40% of my paycheck went to taxes. But I was happy to pay it in return for some of the best healthcare in the world. Later when I moved to China I checked out US insurance options. Given my situation, it seemed like the only coverage I could afford was very limited. So instead I set aside some money in the bank in case there is ever an emergency. If something does happen and I can still walk, the first thing I'll do is hop on a plane to Thailand (which, thanks in part to health tourism, now has some of the best and most affordable hospitals in the world). If something happens and I can't walk, I'm pretty much toast anyway. The hospitals here are scary.

Mind

There are a lot of little bookstores in Jingdezhen that specialize in ceramics. Once in a while you can find a rare gem, like the secret recipes of the ceramic factories, photocopied and bound with staples, hidden away in the stacks like contraband. For my first three years in Jingdezhen, I was desperate for good English-language books. I finally bought an e-reader that really changed my life, although I've spent way too much money at Amazon.com.

I'm also a frequent lurker on the Clayart mailing list. It's amazing how much useful information is buried in the Clayart archives.

In addition to cooking and eating with friends, and excursions around China, visiting ancient ceramics sites, once in a while I leave China entirely, either visiting family in the US or seeing other countries in Asia.

Marketing

My output is quite small because I am still learning and experimenting. I've become an expert at destroying things in the kiln. But when I do have work, I'm lucky to have the support of a couple galleries in Shanghai, as well as a few collectors who buy whatever I can send.

I'm also very lucky to have come to China at a time when the market for hand-made ceramics is really taking off. There's a Renaissance happening in China, a rediscovering of ceramics. Partly it is motivated by investors who turned to ceramics when the contemporary art market fizzled. A bigger factor is the increasing interest in ceramics-related culture—interior design, cuisine, and tea. At the same time, the growing middle class has more disposable income to spend on crafts.



It's also important to note that in China there was never a hard distinction between ceramics and art. Ceramics (and to a certain extent other craft traditions) has always been considered one of the highest forms of art. The Chinese have a great deal of respect for ceramists and the traditions they represent.

My only goal during the past five years in Jingdezhen was to learn as much as I could. I haven't done any marketing, if anything, my strategy has been to convince people not to buy my work because the next kiln load will be better. But I've been very fortunate. I've been featured in a few magazines, and a gallery in Shanghai helps me to sell anything I can send them. I'm slowly building up a clientele purely by word of mouth. I hope that in the next few years I can focus more on production and find a way to have a steady stream of income from my work.

There's a huge difference in culture between China and the West, including tastes in ceramics. Most Chinese still seem to prefer ornate Qing-dynasty-style pottery, but as people rediscover ceramics there is more appreciation of the simpler aesthetics of earlier periods and even folk kilns. I have been deeply influenced by Chinese ceramics (All of the decoration on my pots is the direct result of the forming process, which is related to both the simple aesthetics of tinware and Song-dynasty Qingbai), and although I didn't set out to make ceramics that would sell in China, my Chinese clients seem to enjoy my work and appreciate what I am trying to do. So I'm very fortunate that I'm making work that my target audience actually likes. If I was making Japanese-style teabowls I don't think I would have been as successful.

I don't participate in social networks nor do I sell work through

the web, but I think a personal website is essential. I'm pretty isolated here in Jingdezhen. My website is my only way to reach out. Of course my website is a portfolio but it is also a narrative—it allows me to show people the story behind the work. Sharing the ideas behind the work and introducing people to the context is very important to me. The environment surrounding the work is just as important as the work itself.

I put things on my website whenever I have time. I don't look at website statistics or chat with anyone except through email, so my online experiences are pretty stress-free.

Most Important Lesson

Throughout my life, I've always wanted to be an artist but I was afraid—afraid of failure, afraid of running out of money. In some sense, my fears were justified! I have failed a lot in the studio, and money is still a big issue. But when I was considering whether to move to Jingdezhen, a good friend told me, "Do what you need to do even if it scares you to death. If you love what you are doing then somehow everything will work out." She was right. Things didn't necessarily work out the way I imagined they would, and sometimes I've really felt like quitting. But somehow I got to this point, and I can almost call myself a professional ceramist.

I have so much respect for anyone who makes their living from ceramics. It's one thing to have nice ideas, quite another to make them reality, and to actually make money doing it is incredibly difficult.

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